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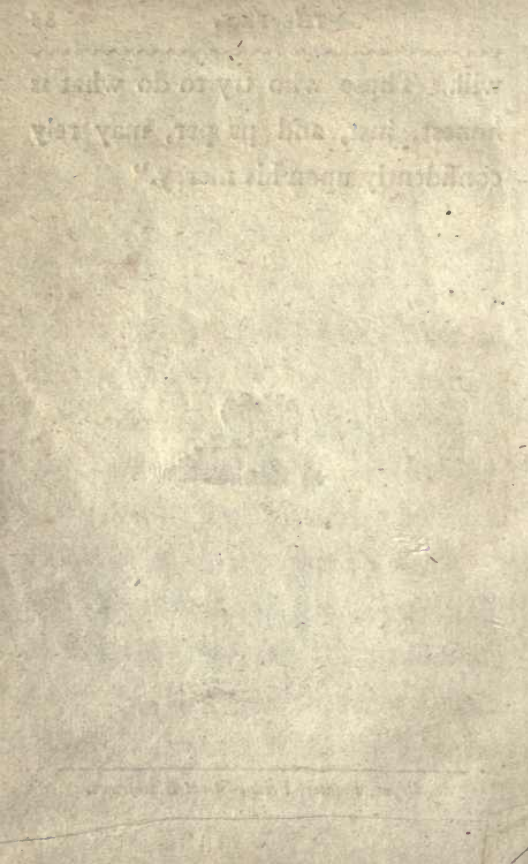
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Castle on the Rock.

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THE
CASTLE ON THE ROCK:

OR,

The Successful Stratagem.

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1808.



Castle on the Rock.

ADJOINING to the sea-shore, in the East riding of the county of York, stood an old castle, belonging to the family of Errington. At the period of which I am now writing, it was deserted by its lord, who lived on the Continent, and converted into a prison for those who offended the powerful Count of Easingwold, who resided near it, in the valley below.

It was an ancient fortress, perched high on the brow of a precipice, like an eagle's nest. The peculiar form of its architecture announced it to have been raised at the time

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when the Saxons governed Britain with despotic sway. When seen at a little distance, it appeared suspended on the very brink of the rock which overhung the sea. The winds were there felt in all their fury; and the howling of the storm, and the raging billows at its foot, seemed frequently to threaten its downfall.

The walls of this mouldering castle contained within them two ladies, who were strictly and separately confined in dungeons. The name of one was Eritha, and that of the other Mercia.

Before their confinement, those ladies were the most intimate friends of each other; and Eritha





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supposed that Mercia had taken her departure for a better world. Some days had elapsed after Eritha had been imprisoned by the order of the inhuman Lord of Easingwold, when she observed, through the bars of her closely-grated window, that a boy, apparently between three and four years old, was sometimes suffered to amuse himself in the garden which she herself was forbidden to visit. The innocent gaiety of the child made an impression on her which frequently filled her eyes with tears—"Happy, unthinking creature," she would exclaim, wringing her hands, in all the bitterness of grief, "this garden appears to you

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a paradise, because you know none better.—You are poor, forsaken, and perhaps menaced by a thousand dangers; but you see them not. Regret for the past, troubles you as little as anxiety for the future; and it were difficult for a monarch, with all his power, to make you more happy than you are, even now—Oh! that I were like you!—Oh! that at least I could clasp you in my arms, and learn from your sweet smile, the art of smiling, though in a prison.”

Her wish to become more intimate with the happy trifler became daily more ardent; and her urgent intreaties at length induced the old jailor to permit her to receive the

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little stranger in her gloomy apartment — But her astonishment and emotion can be more easily conceived than described, when she was informed by the lovely boy, that his name was Henry, the son of Mercia of Windermere, her beloved and long-lost friend; and that she was also confined in a dark dungeon in the same castle.

Count Easingwold's inhuman conduct, in the long confinement of her friend, and his imprisonment of Eritha in the same castle, convinced her that he did not intend either of them to regain her liberty, lest she should discover his villainy to the world, and take measures for rescuing from his


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power her companion in misfortune.

Painful as these considerations were, she was somewhat soothed by indulging a hope that she should be able to prevail on their jailor to let them drag about their captive chains in the same cell. But, alas! the completion of her hopes was not so easy as she expected. Mercia of Windermere was confined as closely as herself; and their jailor was not to be prevailed on to depart, in one single instance, from the instructions of his inhuman lord. Yet this man was not cruel by nature. Perhaps it grieved him to be compelled to treat his prisoners with so much



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harshness ; but he made it a point of conscience to adhere, in the most punctual manner, to the oath which he had been obliged to take to the Count of Easingwold.

“ You see,” said he, “ that I am indulgent, as far as lies in my power. I received no particular command respecting the imprisonment of the child, who was delivered to my custody at the same time with her mother ; and therefore I allow him to enjoy all those advantages from which I am compelled to debar her and yourself ; neither was it forbidden me to furnish Mercia of Windermere with such sources of mental amusement as would beguile her soli-

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tary hours. She has a variety of books, her spinning-wheel, and her embroidery-frame. If she chuses it, she may lay these aside, and employ herself with her pen. —This indulgence shall also be granted to you ; and methinks it must be almost the same thing, whether what you have to say to each other is imparted in writing or in person.”

Here, then, did the jailor kindly open a door for those communications for which these prisoners mutually thirsted: they returned him their most ardent thanks for the hint, and lost no time in making use of it. They wrote to each other daily ; and as the conscien-

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tious feelings of the trusty domestic of the Tyrant Easingwold would not allow him to deliver the letters himself, they were confined to the care of the little Henry. The lovely boy soon became attached to Eritha ; he was always ready to visit her dismal chamber ; and, besides the information which her friend's letters contained, she gleaned from him many interesting anecdotes concerning the inhabitants of the castle, which, however serious their subject, frequently assumed so whimsical an appearance through his infantine mode of relating them, that it was impossible either for his mother or Eritha to refrain from smiling.

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Little did their tyrant imagine that, within the gloomy walls of Errington Castle, his captives would have ever found cause for mirth.

Often in their epistolary communications did they lament their miserable fate; and as often console themselves with the reflection that they were still suffered to live, and to breathe the same air.

They had long suspected that they were not the only unfortunates confined in this fortress; and in the truth of this suspicion they were at length fully confirmed by the following circumstance; though their curiosity was by no means fully satisfied.

The Castle, as it has been already stated, was built on the summit of a lofty rock, whose point appeared designed as a mark for the assaults of all the winds of heaven. — Storms there were frequent and tremendous. In the middle of one tempestuous night, when the wind was raging with its greatest violence, suddenly a remote wing of the castle burst into flames! the wind set towards the quarter where these friends were confined; the sparks flew in at their grated windows; — their danger increased every moment, and every human being seemed to have totally forgotten them. No one had consideration enough to unlock their

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dungeons ; no one shewed the slightest disposition to come to their assistance. The general attention was directed towards the eastern wing of the fortress, which was entirely in flames.

Their terror was of course too dreadful to be described, and Mercia indeed had not to fear for herself alone. The preservation of a life which was infinitely dearer to her than her own occupied all her thoughts ; she trembled for the life of her son.

She was desperate ;—she felt that his destruction was inevitable if he remained with her, and resolved to do every thing she possibly could to preserve him. In the

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wall of her dungeon was an opening barely large enough to suffer the child to pass through; she fastened her bed clothes together; she resolved to let him down by them to the ground, and charged him, as soon as he should reach it, to release himself and fly, or else to find some hiding place where he might remain till the danger was over. The risque was dreadful; nothing but despair could have induced her to commit so dangerous an act, or to adopt such a resolution.

Mercia's endeavours to preserve her little darling were not unsuccessful. He reached the ground in safety; but scarcely had she parted



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with him, when the increasing heat (for by this time the balconies of the neighbouring buildings were in flames) and the volumes of smoke overpowering her senses, she fell without animation on the floor.

The situation of Eritha was nearly similar.—At the moment when she fainted, the only thought which employed her mind, was the hope of a meeting with her friend in another and a better world; a hope which she fully believed was accomplished, when, on once unclōsing her eyes, she found herself released from her dungeon, and perceived by her side the friend whom she loved


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so tenderly, and for whose society she had so long and so anxiously sighed in vain.

“ Oh ! Eritha ! ” — “ Oh ! Mercia ! ” they both exclaimed at once, and sank in each others’ arms, “ What has happened ? ” “ Are we rescued from captivity on earth, or released from the fetters of mortality ? — Where is it that we meet, in freedom, in captivity, or in the life beyond the grave ? ”

Too soon were their doubts removed ; too soon were they compelled to feel, that they were rescued from death but not restored to liberty. The still smoking ruins told them but too plainly that they were still within the

walls of Errington; and the unremitting vigilance with which they were observed, made them well aware, that they had reaped no other advantage from the transactions of the night, except the delight of seeing and embracing each other. But alas! what cruel reflections embittered this delight. Mercia sorrowed for her son, and reproached herself for having parted with him in despair, when, had she detained him with her in the dungeon, he would have been preserved as well as his mother.

Eritha scarcely felt less sorrow for the loss of the beloved child than his mother; and would joy-

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fully have comforted her; but alas! where was comfort to be found? Even should he have escaped from the flames, which were raging with such violence when he quitted his mother, how difficult still did his preservation appear.

They failed not, on the day after the fire, to examine the place whence Mercia had caused the little Henry to descend. The opening was not situated very high in the tower; but close to the place where he must have reached the ground, yawned a most tremendous chasm, the depth of which they vainly endeavoured to measure with their eyes; their flesh

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crept upon their bones, and cold drops of terror chased each other down their pallid cheeks.

Bitter was their grief, but no one heeded their lamentations; their guards attended to nothing but the adventures of the past night; and all that they could collect from their discourse was, that the fire had been kindled by a lady confined in the castle. Her object, as they supposed, was to find some means of escaping, during the confusion which her rash action had necessarily produced. She had failed in her design, but had suffered so severely by springing from a lofty window, and by the wounds she had receiv-

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ed from the fragments of the falling tower, that she was not expected to outlive the night. The good-natured chief jailor too, in his endeavours to prevent the escape of this prisoner (whose confinement seemed an object of greater anxiety to him, than any other,) had met with a fatal accident, and was every moment expected to breathe his last. Eritha and Mercia desired to see him before his death. With a feeble voice he entreated their pardon for the injustice with which he had been compelled to treat them; but he called Heaven to witness that the dreadful oaths which had been exacted from him, had deprived him of the power

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of acting differently. He died, and their future jailors did not treat them with greater lenity, but esteemed it their duty to retain their prisoners in a captivity no less strict than before. They were, however, permitted to live together in the same cell, and to visit the unfortunate lady, of whose existence in the castle they were now informed for the first time, who had made use of such violent means to obtain her liberty ; and who was on the point of paying with her life for having dared to commit so desperate an action.

Curiosity, hope, the fear of finding some beloved acquaintance

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in this wretched captive, or the desire of giving some alleviation to the suffering of an expiring partner in affliction, which of these motives induced them to make this melancholy visit, is difficult to decide. They were conducted to the side of a wretched pallet in a miserable dungeon, on which lay a female whose features were utterly unknown to them, but whose appearance excited in them the deepest sentiments of pity; of that painful pity which knows itself unable to afford relief! On hearing their footsteps, she raised with difficulty her half closed eyes, and with a smile of anguish extended her hand to-

wards them. They exerted themselves to afford her every little alleviation of pain, which their narrow means could furnish; and in executing these mournful services, their tears declared the feelings of their hearts.

“Forgive me,” said the stranger, when after two or three hours their endeavours to relieve her had produced some effect,—“I wished to rescue myself from captivity, and had nearly brought the same fate on you, as that under which I am now groaning. But long suffering is the mother of despair! Forgive me, my friends, forgive me!”

Shortly after she seemed to be

delirious; she counted the years which she had already passed in her dreary dungeon. She raved about her son, for whose arrival she had so long waited in vain, and urged him, as if he was present, to rescue his unfortunate mother. In one of these paroxysms she expired, and left them ignorant of her name and history. In mournful silence they followed to the grave the corse of their late wretched partner in captivity; she was interred in one of the back courts of the prison, and they were conducted after the burial into a gloomy apartment in a quarter of the castle which had escaped the violence of the flames.

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This dungeon was in some respects better than those to which they had hitherto been accustomed; and it afforded them some consolation, that they were suffered to remain together. They endeavoured to escape from present miseries by recalling former happiness, and indulging future hopes; but alas! this resource was of little avail. The loss of their little darling Henry was a source to them of most agonizing reflections. Their guards had not sufficient feeling to interest themselves in, or make enquiries concerning, him; and his mother and her friend had given up all hopes of his being in existence.

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In that night of terror, when Errington Castle was in flames, and Mercia adopted the desperate resolution of dropping her little darling from the window, and committing him to the chances of a different mode of destruction, Henry's kind genius guided him safely through a dangerous path, on every side surrounded by steep precipices and vast tremendous chasms. Weeping and exhausted with fatigue, he was found at the foot of a rock by a peasant of the adjacent valley. On being informed that he had just made his escape from the burning castle, the honest countryman conducted him to the house of one of the

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most distinguished inhabitants for bravery and good nature who resided in the neighbourhood, whose name was Williams. This honest man received the child with that hospitable kindness, which no true Briton ever refuses to the unfortunate. Williams was indeed a true Briton; and he found double pleasure in giving protection to a child like Henry, who to the beauty of a cherub united the most unprotected helplessness: surely there is no claim more powerful to bind a noble heart, and Farmer Williams felt it.

It was long before this good man could comprehend the meaning of the child's broken narra-

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tive; but the names of Eritha and Mercia (both of whom he supposed were burnt in the castle) and his calling himself Henry Windermere, roused Williams's attention sufficiently to induce him to enquire farther into the business; and those enquiries at length made him master of the whole truth.

He needed only to be informed that two unhappy women stood in need of his protection, to make him resolve on granting it. By making enquiries cautiously and directly amongst the household of the Count of Easingwold, he ascertained the truth of what he had collected from the child's

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narration, and also that the captives of whom he spoke had been rescued from the flames. Their history was not wholly unknown to him; he pitied their oppressed situation, and resolved to procure them their liberty if his exertions could possibly effect it.

The unfortunate companions in misery in Errington Castle were one day informed that the Count of Easingwold had sent a new jailor to superintend the government of it; and added that his prisoners would soon find cause to regret the appointment of such a savage as he seemed to be, over them. They trembled as they listened to this prophecy. The strong-

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est aversion against this instrument of Count Easingwold's vengeance was plainly expressed in every feature of the former jailor, yet did he scarcely dare to express his dislike of him aloud: what then had his poor female prisoners to expect?—"How dreadful must that man be," said they, "who can strike terror even into the flinty hearts of those barbarians."

The ladies had not long been informed of the arrival of this dreaded being at the castle, before he entered their dungeon, accompanied by several of their former guards. They trembled as they gazed on the gloomy brow of the man to whose hands their fate


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was now consigned. He scarcely deigned to honour them with a look; whilst he informed them that they must prepare themselves to quit Errington Castle at midnight, the Count of Easingwold not thinking it safe enough, since the late fire, for the confinement of prisoners of their consequence. They wished to address a few words to him, imploring better treatment for the future, but he turned away from them rudely, blamed the attendants for having suffered them to remain unfettered, and having caused heavy shackles to be brought immediately, he saw them rivetted on before he left the dungeon.



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The doors were fastened after him more cautiously if possible than before: at midnight the dungeon was again opened, and they were ordered to follow him immediately, which with trembling steps and palpitating hearts they did without a murmur.

It appears that some opposition had been made to the new governor of this fortress exercising his functions, but he had suppressed it; for as he passed the outer gate with his prisoners, he was heard to say to some of the soldiers of the castle, "tremble wretches when I return! You shall not have opposed our master's will without reward, and

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you shall find that I am able to preserve the office which the Count has thought fit to entrust to my care."

At the entrance of the steep and narrow path by which they descended the rock on whose brow the fortress was situated, stood a close carriage, into which the ladies were hurried.—It was immediately driven off with great velocity, and they travelled many miles without stopping. At length their conductors halted, and one of them riding up to the side of the carriage, addressed his fair prisoners as follows : " Ladies, you are safe from the custody of your tyrant ; and here is the person

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whom you have to thank for your rescue." After these words, some person entered their carriage; and the supposed jailor, who was the benevolent Farmer Williams, withdrew, observing that this was not the time for any further explanation. The carriage was dark, and they could not see the person to whom Williams told them they were indebted for their rescue: but their doubts were soon converted into rapture, when Mercia felt her neck encircled by two little arms, and heard herself called by the tender name of mother by her beloved and long lost child, the interesting Henry of Windermere.

In short, the good Farmer Williams made use of the stratagem before mentioned to rescue them from captivity. His plan succeeded, as the reader has been informed. After they had travelled so far as to be beyond the power of the tyrant Count of Easingwold, who had kidnapped and thus imprisoned them because each had refused to become his mistress. They stopt to take some refreshment, and then proceeded to a distant county, where they spent the remaining part of their lives in the bosom of friendship, and far remote from the iron hand and flinty heart of oppression.



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